Padre Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Padre Island National Seashore

The Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle

Nesting Kemp's ridley

Sea Turtles in the Gulf of Mexico

The Kemp's ridley sea turtle, *Lepidochelys kempii*, is the smallest of the five species of sea turtles found in the Gulf of Mexico. The other species include the loggerhead, green, hawksbill, and leatherback. The Kemp's ridley is the most endangered sea turtle in the world and the one most commonly found on Padre Island National Seashore.

Turtle Traits

The Kemp's ridley has an average length of 23 to 27.5 inches (58.5 to 70 cm) and average weight of 100 pounds (45 kg). The Kemp's ridley is the only sea turtle with an almost circular upper shell. The young are dark gray in color but change as they mature. Adults are olive green above and pale yellow below.

Nests contain 80 to 100 eggs with an average of around 100. The group of eggs laid by one mother at one time is referred to as a "clutch".

The Kemp's ridley's range is chiefly in the Gulf of Mexico, but immature turtles, probably carried by the currents, often appear along the Atlantic coast as far north as New England and Nova Scotia. Its primary nesting beach is a 16-mile stretch of beach at Playa de Rancho Nuevo, Tamaulipas, Mexico.

Kemp's ridleys feed primarily on crabs, although they will eat a variety of marine invertebrates and plants, especially when they are young.

Preserving and Protecting the Species

In order to ensure this species' survival in the event of a natural or political disaster, the governments of the United States and Mexico joined together to re-establish a secondary nesting colony at Padre Island National Seashore.

During each summer from 1978 to 1988, approximately 2,000 Kemp's ridley eggs were transported from Rancho Nuevo to the national seashore. They were incubated here and the hatchlings were temporarily released into the water. They were then collected and transported to a facility in Galveston, Texas. The young turtles were cared for and raised in small tanks. This effort was called the "head-start" program. Scientists hoped that this program would enhance their survival rate by releasing young turtles that were too big for most predators to eat. In nature, only one out of every one hundred to one thousand hatchlings are likely to survive to maturity. Because Kemp's ridley females typically return to the beach of their birth to nest, scientists believed that the female turtles would return as adults. Padre Island National Seashore is where the hatchlings were first released and potentially "imprinted" with the memory of the island. Of the 22,507 eggs received from Mexico, 17,358 (77.1%) hatched and 13,454 turtles were released into the Gulf of Mexico after nine to eleven months of head-starting.

The National Park Service locates, studies, and protects nesting Kemp's ridley turtles and their eggs at the national seashore. From 1979 to 1996, 17 Kemp's ridley nest were documented along the Texas coast, most of which were found at the national seashore. As shown by the table on the next page, nesting has increased in Texas since 1996. Although some head-started turtles have been documented nesting since then, most nesting has been by turtles from the wild stock. Padre Island National Seashore is the most important Kemp's ridley nesting beach in the United States. Sixty percent of the nests found in Texas have been located at the national seashore.

Hatchling Releases

The public is invited to attend many of the Kemp's ridley sea turtlehatchling releases at Padre Island National Seashore. While releases can occur as early as late- May, most releases occur during June, July, and early August. Most releases take place at 7:00 a.m., either a few yards south of the boundary between Closed and North Beaches or in front of the Malaquite Visitor Center. There is no charge for attending a release. Observers are requested not to wear white clothing or white shoes and to turn off all camera flashes. Hatchlings are instinctively drawn to anything bright because they mistake it for the wave crests, which guide them to the water.

Observers are also requested to refrain from smoking because smoking may interfere with the hatchlings sense of smell. Their sense of smell is believed to help them remember the beach, so they can return as adults and lay their eggs. No eating is allowed at the release and we remind all visitors attending the release to refrain from waving their hands because the gulls will think they are feeding them. To avoid stepping on the hatchlings that are in the surf, please remain still if a wave surges around your feet. To avoid wet feet, stay several feet back from the water's edge. For additional information about the releases please contact the Malaquite Visitor Center.

Kemp's Ridley Nests Documented in Texas

Year	Number of nest	Number of eggs	Hatchlings released
1997	9	968	893
1998	13	1,270	800
1999	16	1,681	1,364
2000	12	1,160	1,000
2001	8	837	584
2002	38	3,771	2,536
2003	19	1,718	1,426
2004	42	3,928	3,298
2005	50	4,700	3,402
2006	102	9,717	7,475
2007			

Kemp's ridley hatchlings

For more information visit our website at www.nps.gov/pais or call:

The Hatchling Hotline

(361) 949-7163